DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 221 CG 012 091

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TITLE Sexual Experience as a Factor in Reactions to Rape Victims.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (San Francisco, California, August 26-30, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; Beliefs; Decision Making; *Experience; Females; Males; *Rape; Research Projects; *Responsibility; *Sex Differences; *Sexuality

ABSTRACT

The effects of the sex of the respondent and of the sexual history of the victim on reactions to rape victims were examined. Newspaper accounts described a rape and related some of the victim's testimony at the trial of the accused rapist. The victim's testimony was varied as follows: no information on her sexual history, information on sexual history prohibited by the judge, indication by victim of an inactive sexual history, indication by victim of an active sexual history, and refusal by victim to answer questions about her sexual history. Results indicated consistent differences due to the sex of the respondent. Males tended to see the victim as a greater factor in her own rape and the rapist as less responsible than did females. The effects of sexual history of the victim indicated that victims who refused to discuss their sexual history were believed to be sexually active, and were assigned more responsibility for the rape. (Author)

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Sexual Experience as a Factor in Reactions to Rape Victims

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Paper Presented at American Psychological Association Convention, San Francisco, August, 1977

CG012091

Sexual Experience as a Factor

in Reactions to Rape Victims

In recent years an increasing amount of attention has been given to the crime of rape and the legal rights of the rape victim. Although more than 55,000 rapes were reported in 1974, official estimates of actual rapes are usually much higher. One reason for failing to report a rape is very likely the victim's anticipation of an embarrassing and demeaning court appearance during the trial.

One of the major issues which concerns individuals interested in the welfare of rape victims is the admissibility of testimony relating to the victim's past sexual behavior. For example, in one state a woman's past sexual experience is brought out in court whether it is relevant or not (Wallace, 1976). Legislators at several different levels are currently considering enacting laws (some have enacted laws) which would protect the victim's privacy by limiting greatly the inquiry into the victim's sexual history (Staihar, 1976). The argument has been that the introduction of such information is an unnecessary invasion of privacy and a potential source of emotional harm. Other negative consequences in the form of a reduced likelihood of conviction of the rapist, more negative evaluations of the victim, and a greater tendency for naive observers to see the victim as a precipitating factor in the rape are also suspected as a result of this information. One purpose of the present research was to explore some possible consequences resulting from the introduction of information about the victim's sexual life as evidence during a rape trial.

Another factor investigated in this paper was the effect of the sex of the respondent on reactions to rape victims. Evidence on how the sex of the

respondent is related to social reactions to the rape victim is at present somewhat contradictory. Calhoun, Selby and Warring (1976) reported consistent sex differences, with men seeing the victim as more responsible for her own fate than did women. Jones and Aronson (1973) found no sex differences in the attribution of fault to the rape victim.

The present study was designed to investigate the effects of information about a victim's sexual history during the trial of an individual accused of rape, and the effects of the sex of the respondent on reactions to the victim and to the rapist.

Method

The participants in the study were 128 introductory psychology students (62 females and 66 males) at a middle-sized university in the southeastern United States. The experiment was conducted during regular class periods.

Booklets containing all of the experimental materials were distributed to the class. A cover sheet indicated that a Xeroxed copy of a newspaper article describing a rape trial was attached, along with a questionnaire to assess the subject's reaction to the article. The Xeroxed article was type set to appear like a column of newsprint. A bold face headline read, "Rape Trial Begins". The story described the first day of a rape trial[1]. A brief account of the rape incident was provided along with some innocuous details concerning the early proceedings. The first three paragraphs were identical in all conditions. The final paragraph introduced the experimental variations. The control condition simply reported that the trial adjourned for the day. The other four conditions described a sequence in which the victim was cross-examined by the defense attorney. The attorney was attempting to elicit information concerning the victim's past sexual activities. The four conditions

were as follows:

1. The victim refused to answer the attorney's questions,
2. The judge would not allow the victim to respond since this line of questioning was not permissible,
3. The victim revealed a very inactive sexual history,
4. The victim revealed a very active sexual history.

At this point all of the articles reported that court recessed for the day.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items. Four items referred to the perceived causal role of the victim in the rape. These items were combined into a simple measure of perceived cause with a range of 4 to 24. A second set of six items dealt with the subject's interpersonal evaluation of the victim (Rubin, 1974). They were combined to create a single "liking" measure (Range of 9-54. Separate items asked for subject's perceptions of:

a. The extent to which the acoused rapist was at fault (Range 1-6)
b. The severity of punishment that would be appropriate (Range 1-6)
c. The believability of the victim's testimony (Range 1-6)
d. The extent to which the victim had an unconscious desire to be raped (Range 1-6)
e. The relative responsibility of the victim and rapist for the episode (Range 1-10)
f. The prior sexual experience of the victim (Range 1-6)

When the subjects had completed the task, the booklets were collected and the experimenter explained the purpose and procedure, and answered questions.

Results

Reaction to the accused rapist.

The two items relevant to the rapist's role revealed main effects for sex

of respondent. Females saw the rapist as more at fault for what happened than males ($F(1,118) = 3.70$, $p < .06$). Females also felt that the rapist should be more severely punished than males ($F(1,118) = 3.76$, $p < .055$). There were no differences as a function of testimony variations.

Reactions to the rape victim.

There were five measures which dealt specifically with the reaction to the rape victim. On the composite measure of the victim's causal role in the incident there was a significant main effect for sex of respondent. Women saw the victim as playing less of a causal role than did men ($F(1,118) = 8.86$, $p < .004$). The question dealing with the victim's "unconscious desire to be raped" also revealed a sex of respondent main effect. Females felt the victim has less "desire" to be raped ($F(1,118) = 5.79$, $p < .02$). The question probing the believability of the victim's testimony yielded no significant effects. The Liking index produced a significant main effect for the testimony manipulation ($F(4,118) = 3.05$, $p < .02$). The two extreme means were in the Control condition ($M=30.75$) and the Sexually Active condition ($M=24.75$). The Control victim was liked significantly more than the Sexually Active victim.

The question asking subjects to estimate the victim's sexual experience prior to the rape episode was included for two purposes. First, it served as a manipulation check to insure that the Sexually Active and Sexually Inactive victims are perceived as distinctly different. Second, it allowed for an evaluation of the assumptions subjects make under the other Testimony conditions. A significant main effect for Testimony was revealed on this item ($F(4,118) = 7.01$, $p < .009$). A Newman-Keuls analysis comparing all pairs of means indicated the following differences:

a) The Sexually Inactive victim was viewed as having had significantly less sexual experience than any of the other victims

b) The Sexually Active victim and the Refuse to Answer victim were rated as having significantly more sexual experience than the other three victims. They did not differ significantly from each other.

c) The Control victim and the Judge Prohibits Testimony victim did not differ and they were viewed as having had more sexual experience than the Sexually Inactive victim, but less than the Sexually Active or Refuse to Answer victim.

Relative responsibility assigned to the victim and the accused rapist.

One item asked the subjects to decide how much responsibility to assign each of the participants. The possible options ranged from 0% victim-100% rapist, to 100% victim-0% rapist in 10% increments/decrements. Analysis of this item yielded a significant main effect for sex of respondent and for testimony differences. The sex difference is consistent with the other items. Females assigned a smaller percentage of responsibility to the victim than did males ($F(1,118 = 7.01$, $p < .009$). The testimony effect ($F(4,118) = 2.59$, $p < .04$) indicated that the Refuse to Answer victim was assigned significantly more responsibility than the Judge Prohibits victim.

Discussion

The present findings demonstrate a rather pervasive difference in reactions to rape incidents as a function of the sex of the subject. Men tended to consistently view the rape victim as more responsible for the outcome than did women. The men, when compared to the women, saw the accused rapist as less at fault, deserving less severe punishment, and as being less responsible for the episode. In addition, the men viewed the victim as having

a greater "unconscious desire to be raped". This sex difference in reaction to the victim supports the findings of Calhoun, Selby, and Warring (1976). It should be noted that neither men nor women see the victim as playing the dominant causal role in precipitating the rape. Women assign approximately 25% of the responsibility to the victim, while men on the average assign the victim 34% of the responsibility. Further research will be required before any definitive conclusions are possible regarding the origin of this sex difference in social reaction. One possibility is that women tend to adopt the perspective of the victim much more readily than men since the victim is a woman.

The results of the variations in sexual history provide an intriguing pattern of results with some rather serious implications. Although the manipulation did not influence judgments concerning the victim's causal role in the episode on the composite measure, the victim who refused to provide the information was assigned a significantly greater proportion of the responsibility than the victim prohibited from responding by the judge.

Sexual history differences also led to significant differences in evaluation of the victim. A victim who is sexually active is liked less than a victim about whom no information is provided. This finding confirms the fear that revealing such background material may seriously affect the victim's subsequent relations with others.

The data regarding subject's estimates of the victim's prior sexual experience are especially discomforting from the victim's perspective. The victim's refusal to answer the questions concerning her sexual experiences leads observers to conclude that she is sexually active. To the extent that this assumption has negative implications for the victim, as evidenced by

reactions to sexually active victims, her decision to withold this information could damage her case. When the judge prohibits such testimony, as would be the case under recently proposed legislation, the subjects do not assume a high level of sexual activity. Clearly, the information about a victims prior sexual behavior could influence observer's social reactions to her. A victim's own attempts to protect her right to privacy of information not relevant to her case is used as evidence against her. When that right is legally defined, however, the victim does not suffer. The full extent of this impact needs to be more thoroughly investigated, but as a preliminary finding, the present results are significant.

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Footnote

1. The articles were prepared with the assistance of Ms. Nancy Brachey, a reporter with a local newspaper who had had experience as a court reporter.